

Some thoughts on contemporary paintings in the hope that analogies to architecture might be drawn...

Prologue

From the smallest dimension to the largest and across every order of magnitude without exception, matter organizes into involvements. Nothing is uninvolved, there is nothing outside of involvement, and all involvements are themselves involved. Stars, species and disciplines are involvements, and galaxies, ecologies and cultures are involvements of involvements. Involvements entail likenesses, differences and exchange relations, they evolve, and, though as a rule each behaves discreetly and reliably, discretion and reliability are manners, not laws. Thus, as a prologue to any discussion of disciplines, I would say of matter and its involvements that as are its galaxies and star systems, so are its chemistries and physics, so are its ecologies and species, and so are its cultures and disciplines. But then I must also reiterate that galaxies, chemistries, ecologies, and cultures are all also involved with one another.

From Pleasure to Concept

The presumption of our contemporary cultural discourse is that each of our disciplines has moved beyond the horizon delimited by its founding pleasure principle, a passage paralleled in the sciences as each of its disciplines moved beyond its founding observational intuition, e.g., mechanics surpassing the horizon of Newtonian certainty. In painting, for example, the path beyond pleasure is mapped in terms of an evolution from beauty and verisimilitude to interest to interpretation to concepts, or as Jasper Johns put it, past "retinal boundaries... into a field where language, thought, and vision act upon one another." Self-consciousness, indicated in the formation of disciplines as such and elaborated in the evolution of their internal discourses, is inextricable from these migrations beyond pleasure. Painters talk to each other, of course, but the conversations that occur among paintings are much more interesting. For one thing, paintings can live much longer than people.

Though the journey of each discipline beyond pleasure principle to conceptual principle has its own historical particulars, from the perspective of deeper processes, the journey belongs to our urge to power over matter, which is to say none other than matter's will to power over itself, which is to say none other than the lust for more effects. Power and effects are conjugate; neither exists without the other. And, though we must strive to entail them toward purpose, they constitute end in themselves.

In painting, an ancient and interminable roil over disciplinary autonomy had by the 1960s been re-formulated by Clement Greenberg from an exercise in classification to an historical mission. Greenberg and his followers posed “medium specificity” as painting’s only means to resist the devaluing effects of mass production and consumption:

The essence of modernism lies in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence. Modernism used art to call attention to art. The limitations that constitute the medium of painting – the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of the pigment – came to be regarded as positive factors...

Argued in terms of characteristic methods and constitutive materials, Greenberg’s medium specificity retained the philosophical inclination to construct categories on the basis of essences. Long before post-structuralism pulled the plug on arguments in essence, however, Greenberg’s defensive battlement against mass culture began to burst from within, unable to girdle neither art’s insatiable appetites nor its congenital difficulties with authority. Ultimately, the deconstruction of the arguments that legitimized and regulated disciplinary boundaries, widely interpreted as a final impeachment of disciplines as such, infiltrated the parochial refutations of Greenberg’s medium specificity and a final blow was dealt to painting qua painting, or so it seemed.

Every boundary became a permeable membrane; as pop culture began to mingle with high, the discreet practices of painting and sculpture and architecture succumbed to ménages and mongrels of every sort. Nevertheless, an ambition for art as such to resist consumption persisted. Thus did conjectural art practices find new resilience in the regime of the Conceptual. Disciplines, methods and techniques, materials, histories, judgements or affects, none held ground as constitutive in its own right. The apotheosis of art as cultural practice had become the idea instantiated in any particular material construction; the less obfuscated by material distractions, the better.

The Conceptual Principle

Working in The Hague, Philip Akkerman paints nothing but self-portraits, one after another, year after year. He poses in a mirror, works typically, though not exclusively, with a process formalized in the Renaissance, and “when the complete surface is filled up with paint, when there is no white spot visible any more, the painting is finished.” “I don’t care about good and bad,” he says, “because what is good or bad?” (Fascinated, I visited a gallery with a thought to buy, but when I got there, I froze. Should I buy one, or two or ten or must I buy every one in the show, or even everyone that exists: how do I choose an Akkerman: my favorite? At random? Should I pick the one I find most_____? {beautiful, interesting, dull, typical, unusual, repulsive, gripping})

In fact, what is an Akkerman: his paintings and his art are not the same; they are not the same matter, though each exists in the same materials. Engaged in a

cheeky discussion with the history of Dutch self-portraiture, his work opens other dialogues, most obviously with Cindy Sherman's self re-contextualizations. Though Sherman's inaugural *Untitled Film Stills* situated her work first in photography, work such as the recent *Clowns* has crossed over decisively into painting, though still made with camera and film – a testimony to the fact the disciplines are better delimited by the effects they study and produce than by the materials they use.

At greater distance, Akkerman's work speaks with the serialized portraits of Warhol, Richter and Golub and with other lifetime works such as Josef Albers' *Homages to the Square* or On Kawara's *Today Series*, better known as the *Date Paintings*. In these, Kawara paints the date of the day of the painting's execution on a monochrome field, using the language and calendar convention of the city in which the itinerant artist happens to be painting on that particular day. Both Akkerman and Kawara use a methodical approach, one that permits some improvisatory character but quiets pictorial indulgence in favour of concept, an attitude toward art making that has, in its exaggerations of limitations, come to be called rule-based. A key difference between these two bodies of work is the means by which each constructs the relationship between painting as an historically self-conscious discipline and the conceptual ambition of the art.

Kawara asserts the priority of the conceptual project over its disciplinary legacy. Without entirely eradicating the role of painting in the *Dates*, he nevertheless subordinates painting to concept. Concept is the subject matter of each painting and each is an icon proclaiming the priority the concept. Whether or not On Kawara owes anything to Josef Albers, the *Date* paintings owe much to *homages to Squares*. Like cobra and mongoose, the *Homages* and the *Dates* are locked together in contest, the skills of the one so honed against the strengths of the other that, in the end, they become but two parts of the same involvement. Anticipating Greenberg, the *Homages* isolate and extol the 'properties of pigment,' that is, color not as ideal abstraction or pure sensation, but as paint's infinitely nuanced material color faculty. Quelled into servitude, every other possible feature of the painting – canvas, composition, edge, stroke, figure, reference – join into a repetitive mantra intoned only to intensify the color effect. That effect strives in each canvas for such immediacy of presence as to stand out of the reach of indication, of comparison, of judgement, of thought itself. The proliferation of the *Homages* reinforces the irreducible, auratic singularity of each painting. Indeed, the achievement of Albers' repetitions is to cause the thread of likeness that affiliates the *Homages* to dissolve as each registers itself as absolute.

The *Date* paintings, too, appeal to acute restraint and to the infinitely nuanced color faculty of paint. The pigments of the background monochrome in each *Date* are mixed anew by the artist and thus paint color constitutes the major point of improvisation in each work. But here hard edges of paint do not construct an interminable drone of squares, but words and numbers, that is, those figures whose intense powers are twofold. Admitting of nothing intrinsically sensible, referring to nothing meaningful, dates, like numerical sequences, are those figures that produce an effect of abstraction far more powerful than any non-

objective figure or indexical mark. Like words, dates transform seeing into reading; they transport the viewer elsewhere, away from the presence of page or canvas to *topos ouranos*. The barely palpable specificity of the painterly improvisation in a *Date* is trampled to the threshold of oblivion by the specifying effect of denatured serial information, whose particular horror seems to belong to the 20th century.

A *Date*, then, born from the talents of paint, annihilates painting. The abject genius of these works is to keep the discipline of painting alive, if by a thread, by submitting a painting to ritual suicide every day. The artist even provides a casket for the carcass, a wooden box, lined with newspaper clippings or other memorabilia from the day. No other painting so captures the despairs of a discipline thinking itself at the brink and the empty numb that is today the affect of tragedy, and makes of the two the same. For one affected by painting, facing one or two *Dates* unsettles, many at once borders on unbearable. (And when I encountered a Kawara of my birthday – **JUNE 2, 1951** – the effect on me was unspeakable: elated for an instant by my enshrinement, I then felt breath sucked from me by vast indifference. Though Freud may not have foreseen the coming of the conceptual principle in art, he did grasp that moving beyond the pleasure principle meant facing death.)

Beyond the Conceptual Principle

A condensation of untold influences, each involvement of matter sets into motion a persistency with its own momentum and its own powers to adapt to and incorporate new influences, though some of these at first seem threats certain to extinguish it. Thus, though some of these at first seem threats certain to extinguish it. Thus, though every involvement will go extinct, they are not easy to eradicate; certainly none can be wished away nor shamed from existence by slander. Hence the discipline of painting proved more durable than imagined by those who diagnosed its imminent demise, incorporating into its robust genome the infectious influences of the reductivists, the conceptualists, of commodity culture, media, digital technology and more, as if these were no more than short fragments of viral DNA.

Painting's sublation of (the thread of) the conceptual principle is a period event of metamorphic diversification as gripping as the Cambrian Explosion, one that might be named after Richter, not so much to honor a single painter as to cite a location where a cocktail of new influences produced an eruption of painting. There, the breach between discipline painting and cultural practice subsided, and the tow began to braid together into a thicket of new branches of conjectural painting.

Along my favourite of those branches, painters like David Reed and Jonathan Lasker revisit the repeating motif as a means to explore the adequacy of painting (and each painting) both in and as an evolving, historical and conceptual world, that is, in and as involvement. If Reed's color-symphonic settings of gestural arabesques and Lasker's urbane improvisations on ideographic riffs establish the rigor and range (intellectual and affective) of the motif program, then Fabian

Marcaccio, with his 661 “conjectures for new paint management,” explores the extremities, perversions and pathologies of its outer fringe. And it is along this branch, I suggest, that Akkerman’s experiment is well located.

The ascetic repetitions of Albers and Kawara meditate upon an elected aspect of painting technique as such, relegating the remainder of the inventory. Motif painting’s approach to the discipline is different. A motif is always particular, always a provisional choice of the artist, and therefore though not arbitrary, always capricious. The point of a particular repeating motif is that it does not pretend to distill paintings essence in any sense, either as an archive of characteristic methods and constitutive materials or as an historical, conceptual or phenomenological category. The difference between the effect of repetition and the effect of repeating motif is to shift the question away from the ontological *What is painting?* to the performative *What can painting do?* and finally to *What else can painting do that no other discipline can do as well?*

Repeating motif paintings render moot the enduring debate about figure, abstraction and non-objectivity. Whether a Reed arabesque or the *idée fixe* in Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique*, a motif is arbitrary, non-objective abstraction in isolation become vivid figure in iteration. Akkerman’s audacious leap is to assert the artist’s face, that most irrefutable of painting’s representations, not as figural subject matter but as repeating motif.

Absent any overt display of the conceptual project, indeed, absent any evidence of it at all, each Akkerman is self-contained and rooted firmly in the tradition of self-portraiture as a genre, but at the same time joins in the formation of the concept-work. Concept and painting become symbiotic cohabitants of the same material and image, each occupying different niches of sensation and cognition.

Notwithstanding his scattered ironic nods to the masterpieces of his predecessors, the sheer relentlessness of Akkerman’s project assaults the crowning achievement of Dutch self-portraiture at its core. The eighty-six Rembrandts and the thirty-seven Van Goghs (more than half executed during the three years before his suicide) were each painted as an occasion, and they have come to define the profound power of self-portrait painting to plumb from facial imperfections through frailty and travail into the very soul, telling a truth no other medium can so tell. The 2000-plus Akkerman’s (to date), on the other hand, tell us nothing of the artist, they offer no record, no intimacy, no glimmer of a life behind the surface, not even a sense of the artist as an animate being. To construe Akkerman’s project either as a ritual or an exercise in time documentation is a mistake.

With each Akkerman, we get instead a study in the prodigious superficiality of painting - not a lie, because a lie would mean there was some truth to be told – but an etude in the cunning of the cosmetic, in surface, in flatness, in the properties of pigment, in much that Greenberg called forth from painting. If applied makeup hopes to lay as close to skin as possible, Akkerman’s paint is makeup as skin, but also as muscles, bones, organs, psyche and soul, all squeezed

into a layer thinner than skin, less than 1mm deep, into the three layers, that is, of grisaille technique.

Akkerman's cosmetics resonate with Sherman's virtuosic hijinks pitting costume and setting against self, with costume always winning. In this sense, the work of both artists harkens to the once-popular but now extinct genre of the *tronie*, a painting of a person – often the artist, but as often not – used as a skit to stage painterly tricks and gimmicks, special effects, strange costumes, exotic characters, odd gestures – all in order to attract sales. Hals, Vermeer (including his *Girl with a pearl Earring*) and Rembrandt all painted tronies, and many of the latter's revered "self-portraits" actually belong in this less than auspicious category of product.

Yet there is a crucial difference between a Sherman and an Akkerman. The butt of every Sherman is her self and thus each has as a subtext a critique of Self. An Akkerman does not. An adequacy in and of itself, each Akkerman is also imbued with the rhythms of the conceptual project. Without palpable presence in the painting, it is concept that attempts to transform the artist's face into motif and allows each next painting to dissolve just a bit more the received values, aura and legitimation painting once obtained from self – self as subject and self as artist – far more dispassionately than Kawara. It is no accident that each Akkerman is designated only by year and sequence number. Yet, while resistance and critique thrive in Akkerman's project, they do so not as purpose but as effect. The project conveys neither the heroic resignation of Greenberg's medium specificity nor the tragic negations of conceptual art.

Epilogue

DH Lawrence wrote that, after forty years of struggle, Cezanne finally painted an apple. Lawrence suggests that Cezanne's apple was at last entirely original to painting, that it had cast off all the lines of representation that would tether the painting to the fruit as its guarantor. It was an accomplishment, Lawrence argued, greater than Plato's. But the writer went on to say that when it came to the face, Cezanne failed utterly, unable to overcome the power of the face to regulate its representations, a power that obtains from the intricate involvement of face not only with self, but with being and thus with the entire apparatus of metaphysics. It is one thing to put a dent in metaphysics as did Cezanne's apple; it is another to disassemble it entirely. I cannot say that Akkerman has yet managed to take the face, his face, where Cezanne could not, to originate it entirely in and as a painting motif, despite his twenty years of diligence and dedication to the problem. Given the stakes, even the neurology, it is unlikely to be possible. But, then, on the other hand, Akkerman's project is not art as endgame, not process, not ritual, not the labor of Sisyphus or even the labor of love, just the collected piecework made by a guy with a peculiar job.